

"Hidden in Cellar, Match to Powder Keg, Girls of '62 Chose Blast to Cheat Indians"

This dramatic headline, although not how it would be stated today, is what was presented in a Minneapolis paper in 1925 (probably the Minneapolis Journal) leading in to an article that was marking the 63rd Anniversary of the "U.S.-Dakota War of 1862" with a pioneer's memories.

The article continues with the sub-title:

"Little Crow's Siege of Fort Ridgely Recounted by Surviving Pioneers – Patriotic Program Scheduled Aug. 20 to Mark 63rd Anniversary."

The story goes on from there to relate ...

"Fort Ridgely, Minn. Aug. 15 - Twelve days in a dark closed cellar with a barrel of powder and a handful of matches, ready to cheat a horde of Indians out of a few more scalps, is still fresh in the mind of Mrs. Robert Thul of Shakopee, one of the few survivors of the Fort Ridgely battle."

"Sixty-three years ago this week, the Indians, under Little Crow, were on the rampage in the Minnesota river valley. Annually, old settlers and pioneers gather at Fort Ridgely to talk over old times."

"Among the survivors of the historic massacre are eight persons living near Henderson: Mrs. Ellen Allanson, daughter of Joseph R. Brown, 84 years old; Franz Grassinger, 80 years old; Theodore Hedrich, 81 years old; Mrs. Henry Mattei, 80 years old; Charles Connick, 76 years old; Mrs. Charles Gornnick, 75 years old; Frank Brahs, 73 years old; and John Hepp, 70 years old."

"But of all the reminiscences of the Minnesota pioneers, Mrs. Thul of Shakopee related several 'thrillers' last week that rival the imagination of the moving picture producers."

"We came from Germany in 1858," she said, "and father took a claim three miles east of Sleepy Eye. One day while we all were at the home of my father's brother, the Indians burned our cabin."

Father Shot in Back

"Father came home to build another and on April 27, 1860, while seated in the cellar he had dug, he was shot in the back and killed."

"Mother determined to hold the claim and with the help of two of my uncles managed to get along until the outbreak occurred."

"We were at dinner and the cabin door was open. I heard a scream and looking out, saw a neighbor boy running toward the house. His right arm hung limp and he was red with blood."

"When he reached the door he couldn't speak and I have never since seen such a look of horror in anyone's eyes. We realized what had happened and hastily began preparations for flight while the boy sobbed out his story."

"His mother, two brothers and three sisters had been killed in their home, the boy and his father escaping. We had learned afterward that the father had hidden in a hollow tree."

"Our trip to New Ulm could not be called a flight, as we rode in an old farm wagon drawn by oxen. While we were hitching the oxen together we could see Indians all about us a mile away."

"Homes were in flames and we could see groups being attacked."

"The confusion in New Ulm was awful," Mrs. Thul continued. "Women were running about screaming and wringing their hands. Many had lost their reason."

Mrs. Thul then told of being placed in the cellar with a number of others. "They told us to set the powder afire and blow us all up if the Indians took the town," she said. "We were told that would be better than capture."

But on the ninth day of the siege Little Crow was driven off and the defenders rescued.

"Explanations, Corrections and Elaborations"

This is a good story from the point of view of someone who lived through the fighting. Anna Schmitz Thul, born in 1850 in a suburb of Luxembourg City called Eich, came with her parents, John and Catherine (nee "George") Schmitz from Luxembourg (not Germany!) and settled in Bellevue, Iowa for a year before coming to Brown County in 1859. John's brothers, Peter and Jacob Nicolas, along with sister, Mary, had come to New Ulm in 1857 after a year

spent in Chicago and they were joining them to make their new life in America. Eventually, all seven siblings would live in this area, along with their father, Joseph.

Both Peter and Jacob Nicholas, who lived together with their father Joseph Schmitz, were actually farming on land that was just onto the Dakota Reservation, about nine miles west of New Ulm. When John came, he settled another mile west, further onto the reservation - a condition that did not endear them to the Dakota! He was killed as Mrs. Thul relates, after refusing an Indian man food and drink when he came calling at their cabin and making a nuisance of himself. It was always presumed that the same Indian burned John Schmitz' farm place and when Schmitz was rebuilding it, he was shot and killed by him. The suspect was brought to trial, but escaped during the hearings. Catherine then moved in with her brothers-in-law with her own family of four children until the war, after which she moved to Shakopee and married Joseph Thiem, dying in 1890.

There are a few discrepancies to clear up and elaborations to make that do not take away from the story, but should be corrected. In order from the newspaper story, they are:

- *They did not spend 12 days in a cellar. The Schmitz family came to New Ulm on August 18; the two Battles of New Ulm ended on August 24; with a city-wide evacuation on August 25, therefore seven days would have been the longest time anyone spent in a cellar.
- *Mrs. Thul did not participate in the two Battles of Fort Ridgely, they were in New Ulm, 15 miles southeast of Ft. Ridgely, the whole time. It is inconceivable to have left the (perceived) safety of New Ulm to go to the false security of Fort Ridgely! *The John Schmitz family came from Luxembourg, not Germany, in 1858.
- *Her reference to living 3 miles east of Sleepy Eye was correct while she reminisced, although Sleepy Eye was not a town in 1862, beginning in 1872.
- *It is believed that the boy who warned the Schmitz extended family was John Bluhm, whose family was murdered in nearby Milford earlier that same day (August 18.) Bluhm's life was filled with effects of the war, causing mental instability for the rest of his life. "Shell-shock" (World War I) and "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" (Vietnam War) are modern names used to describe the mental condition brought on by the first-hand the horrors of war. Mrs. Thul cites people in the barricaded area of New Ulm who had "lost their reason" as another example of this trauma.
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- *The woman charged with lighting the gunpowder was said to be Anna's mother, Catherine George Schmitz, per a letter from Sleepy Eye resident, E.P. Bertrand to Luxembourg gazette publisher, Nicholas Gonner, around 1891. This spawned Gonner's poem, "A Courageous Woman," where he praised the Luxembourger's courage calling her, "Dommeldinger Mary." However, many contradictory sources bestow that honor on Catherine's sister-in-law, Mary Schmitz Ryan, who was born in the Luxembourg town of Dommeldingen. A plaque on the very building where many women and children were hidden in the cellar with the famed gunpowder keg still stands in New Ulm with Mary's name on it!

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Peter Schmitz, Anna Schmitz Thul's uncle, is Terry's great-great-grandfather.

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